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## **Before the Cap and Gown: Getting the UT Campus Ready for Commencement**



The University of Texas at Austin has come a long way since its first commencement ceremony. But one thing that hasn't changed in all the years leading up to the 133<sup>rd</sup> Spring Commencement is the entire university community's expectations for maintaining the honor and dignity of the occasion. What does it take to make the campus ready for commencement and to meet those high expectations? To find out, we went behind the scenes with one of the primary departments involved in creating this annual ritual: Facilities Services.

## Planning & Scheduling

An event of this size and significance requires a great deal of planning up front. It also requires good communication and collaboration among all the groups involved.

This year, the event was held on Saturday evening, May 21, 2016. Planning began well in advance of commencement, as early as January. To begin, a comprehensive work order was established by Project Management & Construction Services (PMCS) to support University Events, who is responsible for orchestrating the university-wide ceremony. This work order provided the essential details for what was needed, where and when. With that information, Facilities Services teams were assigned accordingly to carry out the necessary tasks. A master schedule was followed, which helped everyone stay on track.

The master schedule, construction of the main stage, electrical support and other contributing tasks are managed by PMCS, with whom Facilities Services (FS) works closely throughout the entire process. PMCS sends out the master schedule around 10 days prior to the main event. FS teams meet with PMCS to discuss any particulars of the current year. For example, security concerns were high in the year when the



*From staging to landscaping, the university's commencement ceremony set-up involves a great deal of planning and coordination from Facilities Services and PMCS teams who work behind the scenes.*

Boston Marathon bombings occurred. As the teams run through the schedule, they also discuss any changes from the previous year, such as when seating added on University Avenue resulting in an additional area for the FS grounds crew to prep and clean-up.

FS teams manage the landscaping, cleaning, event set-up, and more for both the university-wide ceremony and the university's individual schools and colleges that host graduation ceremonies and

receptions. This year, the individual ceremonies were held on Friday, May 20, and Saturday, May 21. Each team manages its specific tasks that occur before, during and after commencement takes place—often close to or even all at the same times and places, which requires careful coordination as the events unfold.

The Facilities Service Center (FSC) provides support for facilities-related service requests and event planning on campus. For commencement, FSC manages the work orders for the individual convocations. This year, they handled approximately 35 work orders for these events. One work order often covers more than one school's or college's convocation. For example, event support requestors using Gregory Gym for their ceremonies submitted one work order, but it covered seven different graduations or receptions: three in the College of Liberal Arts for the Department of Government, Department of Psychology and



Department of Economics; two in the McCombs School of Business for their MBA Program and MPA Program; one for the College of Education; and one for the School of Law. Multiple schools and colleges requested event support at the Erwin Center and at the Performing Arts Center.

### Prior to the Event

FS' Landscape Services supervisors begin reviewing the conditions of the Main Campus grounds in January. They look to see what plant material needs to be replaced in the areas surrounding where the ceremonies will take place, which includes the "Six Pack" (the six buildings on either side of the South Mall), the courtyards, around the Littlefield House, and down University Avenue.

Addressing the grounds properly takes months of advance work. In years past, when events were permitted on the South Mall, the well-worn turf had to be replaced annually or semi-annually at a cost of around \$15,000. Trees were also damaged. Now, thanks to Facilities Services' Urban Forestry manager, Jim Carse, who urged the university to reconsider holding events there, the lawn and trees are preserved, and the university saves money and time. Still, there is much to be done to meet the high standards of commencement.

As Mike Wallick, a landscape supervisor, explains, "Our staff spend a lot of time to make the campus look good for the graduates and their families. For us, it's like the Super Bowl and the World Series combined. If we do well all year but fall short on that day, it won't matter." Wallick says that they've learned how important it is to start early because their professional reputation is on the line. This is a recurring theme that echoes across the department as the teams prepare for commencement.

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— LANDSCAPE SUPERVISOR MIKE WALLICK



*Landscape Services teams make the campus look picture-perfect for this important occasion.*

Around the first of April, the lawn around the South Mall is closed off. The turf is aerated, fertilized, and left to rest. The eight landscaping zones on the Main Campus all get the same assessment in January and are prepared the last two weeks before commencement, when crews work an hour or so each day to fine-tune or manicure the landscaping. A week before commencement, they have to turn the grounds over to

PMCS for stage set-up, so landscapers can no longer work on those spaces. Just prior to the big day, Landscape Services crews clean the curbs and gutters, which are often hard to reach when cars are parked there.

Across campus, during the weeks leading up to commencement, PMCS crews put up barricades, remove graffiti, repair pot holes, and address tripping hazards. FS' Custodial Services crews clean and polish floors in the spaces where the individual convocations are held.



*Event & Moving Services is on the scene to provide set-ups for the big day.*

Two weeks prior to the event, FS' Events & Moving Services (EMS) teams start setting up the furniture and other items needed for all the commencement activities. "EMS is responsible for supporting the main event as well as for the 35 work orders for the individual commencement events, which means the EMS warehouse is, for the most part, emptied out of its rental items during this significant time of year," said Ben Reid, manager of Central Services.

Spread out among the various venues of the 2016 commencement were a multitude of event-related items, which included:

- 112 4'x8' platform stages
- 3,000 plastic folding chairs
- 1,000 orange padded chairs
- 500+ 6'x8' tables
- 200 trash and recycle cans

*EMS is also responsible for transporting the instruments for the Longhorn Band to and from the ceremony.*



What would a proper commencement for this venerable university be without all the pomp and circumstance provided by the colors of the flowing flags, billowing banners, or the ceremonial seals? FS' Custodial Services is responsible for the care and provision of these distinguished elements. This team makes sure these elements are in their proper places at each venue. They also place the requested linens for the tables that EMS sets up. As with most events, they are placing linens close on the heels of the set-up of the tables, another example of how critical collaboration among the teams is for these events.

Custodial Services is also known for another very prominent feature at the university-wide ceremony. This team is the "Keeper of the Maces". See sidebar.

Special occasions on the university's Main Campus are made more striking with the cascading waterfalls springing forth from the iconic Littlefield Fountain, where many a graduate poses for memorable family photos. The Zone 4 experts from FS' Facilities Operations & Maintenance division are responsible for ensuring that Littlefield Fountain is cleaned and working properly. The LBJ Fountain, which is also a prominent feature on campus, was already prepared prior to the Vietnam War Summit held at the LBJ Memorial Library in April this year. While water conservation is always a consideration, and many fountains across campus are stopped for much of the year, the significance of commencement gives this crew the opportunity to allow the water to flow in both landmarks.



## KEEPER OF THE MACES

Facilities Services' Custodial Services Division serves a unique yet important role for commencement: They are the "Keepers of the Maces" for The University of Texas at Austin. The division's dedicated staff takes responsibility for keeping the more than 40 processional maces secured and maintained. Prior to the commencement processional, a custodial team delivers the maces to be used that year to the ceremonial site. A note is included for each mace with a description of its particular significance. When not being used for commencement exercises, the maces are on display at the Perry-Castañeda Library (PCL).

### History

The maces were crafted by Carl Eckhardt, Jr., an engineer and professor with the university, who became head of UT's Physical Plant in 1931. In today's sustainable terms, he "repurposed" wood from the original Old Main building to create the maces, which have been used in commencement exercises since 1956.

### See and Learn More

View this [Daily Texan article](#): "'Keepers of the Maces' help maintain UT tradition" and view the accompanying [video](#).

Read the e-booklet [The Maces of UT Austin \(PDF, large\)](#) to see detailed photos and get more historical information about all 40 of the maces.



In the days closer to commencement, PMCS crews begin set-up. They build the stages and scaffolding for the university-wide ceremony. Their electricians provide for all the electrical needs for the set-ups outside.

### **On the Days of the Events**

On Friday morning, the day for some of the individual ceremonies, crews report to campus between 6:00-6:30 a.m.

Landscape Services teams do touchups of the grounds surrounding where the individual school or college convocations are held, such as at the Erwin Center, Gregory Gym or the Performing Arts Center. The last touch-ups must be completed by noon, when most of the staff are sent home, with the exception of the supervisory staff and landscape maintenance crews. Then, they are split up with two crew leaders, one in charge of the South Mall and Main Plaza, and the other stationed to attend areas surrounding the individual convocation venues. They ensure that trash cans do not overflow and take care of any standing water or tree branches on the grounds.

On Saturday, the day of the university-wide ceremony as well as some other individual convocations, facilities crews arrive between 6:00-6:30 a.m., as if it were a regular work day. Custodial Services teams put up restroom signs and check for last-minute cleaning requirements.



*Landscape Supervisor Mike Klemmer reviews the checklist for the final touches.*

Landscape crews do touch-ups in the areas surrounding the main stage, following the master schedule. Then around noon, the bulk of the staff are sent home, while supervisors and crew leaders remain behind to manage any unforeseen incidents occurring up to the final hours. For example, one year a strong rain shower in the afternoon left puddles on the multitude of chairs, and each had to be blow-dried so attendees could use them. Broken branches may need to be cleared as well.



*During the final hours, an afternoon rainstorm may leave puddles on the chairs, which then have to be dried before attendees arrive.*

Most of us can remember a time when we attended a formal ceremony that was interrupted with a loud noise or other distraction that took away from the dignified tone of the occasion. To ensure that a false alarm does not sound off during the various convocations or the main ceremony, FS' Fire Safety Systems technicians disable the fire panels and then remain standing by to monitor them at each location where a ceremony takes place.

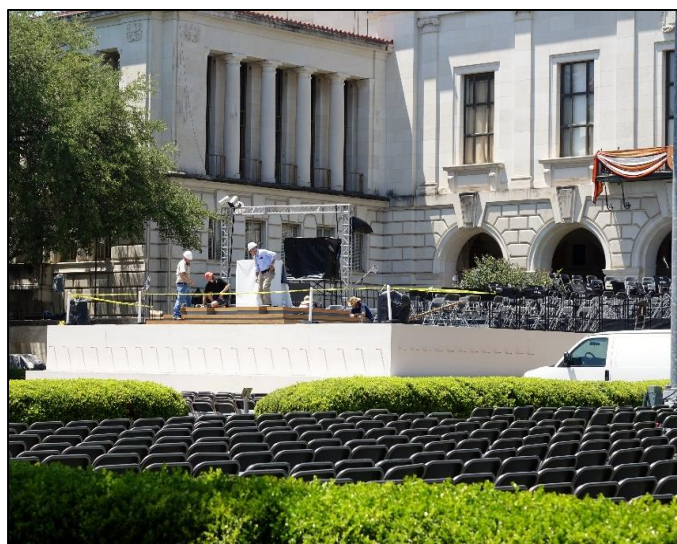
Throughout the day, the FSC and PMCS have additional phone coverage available at 512-471-2020 to assist with facilities-related inquiries or issues. Staff members are assigned to provide on-the ground

support throughout the day. For example, Custodial Services' weekend crews unlock the indoor spaces to be used. Custodians also provide porter services, which include tidying up and replenishing paper supplies and soap in the restrooms and maintaining the appearance of public areas. Landscape Services employees are on hand to pick up trash from the campus grounds. EMS staff are on standby throughout the day. And PMCS staff are working the main event.

### **After the Main Commencement Ceremony**

Crews must wait for the "all clear" from C.J. Wiles, the associate director for PMCS' Construction Services division, before they can begin clean-up of the university-wide ceremony area. Clean-up may not begin until around 9:00-9:30 p.m. because students and their guests are often taking photos after the ceremony.

Custodial Services crews pick up the items such as the flags, banners and podium seals delivered to the main stage, clean the well-used restrooms on campus and lock up the spaces used that day. EMS crews



*Carpenters from PMCS must take down the staging they built just days before (as shown here).*

break down their set-ups from the main ceremony. PMCS crews break down the main stage and electrical set-ups. FS Solid Waste & Recycling collects the trash picked up from the grounds by landscape maintenance crews, with several additional runs throughout the day for the more-than-usual amount of trash. Chair contractors bring in their crews to pick up the chairs, so the landscape crew must work around them. In a cooperative effort, Solid Waste & Recycling stations one of their trucks near where the groundskeepers are gathering waste. This saves groundskeepers from having to haul the bags a much longer distance to a dumpster for the truck crew to pick up.

There is a theory held among groundskeepers that the hotter the event, the more trash that is generated. This theory may not be proven scientifically, but our landscape crews have experienced the phenomenon first hand after commencement. Hotter weather means more need for things that get left behind, such as water bottles and those give-away fans that keep attendees cool.



*Clean-up is extensive and includes all the areas where seating had been set up earlier in the week.*



The work for all the facilities crews continues until around 1:15-2:30 a.m. on Sunday. This is quite a long day for the staff who arrived on the scene around 6:00 a.m. on Saturday.

### **Inclement Weather and Emergency Operations Center**

As much as we would like Mother Nature to cooperate with us, sometimes she doesn't heed the burnt orange call for incident-free weather surrounding the days of commencement. In 2015, dangerous storms



*The 132nd Commencement was an epic weekend, full of record-breaking weather in Austin. But the wind and rain didn't put a damper on celebrations for The University of Texas at Austin's Class of 2015, which celebrated with fireworks and a Tower lighting one day late. (Reported by University Communications. Photo by Marsha Miller.)*

led to the cancellation of the ceremony, much to everyone's disappointment, including the crews whose adrenaline was still in high gear.

In 2008, a week prior to the ceremony, a major hail storm pelted the campus, causing over \$1 million in damages. The central zone, including the Main Building, the Littlefield Home and many greenhouses were the hardest hit. Facilities staff sprang into action. By 6:30 a.m. the next morning the campus was being secured; by 7:00 a.m. zone maintenance supervisors were calling window vendors and orchestrating repairs. FS Instrumentation & Controls technicians brought building equipment back online from power interruptions. Landscape staff began clearing the grounds and addressing tree damage. Crews worked diligently throughout the week. An email from the university's president thanked the staff for their "Herculean work" that made it possible for commencement to take place, despite the tremendous obstacles. FS and PMCS continued to collaborate on cleanup efforts into the summer that year.

The Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is staffed with representatives from the University Police Department, Parking & Transportation Services, Fire Prevention Services, Facilities Services, PMCS and other departments who are there to oversee the safety and security of everyone attending commencement.

Meteorologist Troy Kimmel is there monitoring the weather. A representative of Campus Safety and Security is in charge of the EOC. Cameras mounted throughout the commencement areas are monitored and controlled from the EOC. The Center provides critical information to the university president, should a decision to cancel need to be made. Facilities supervisors at the EOC provide facilities-related oversight, respond to any facilities issues that may arise, and provide centralized communication with the on-the-ground facilities teams.



## Supporting the Mission

Facilities Services understands that one of the university's primary missions is to educate its students, and commencement serves as the culmination of that mission. This dedicated group of facilities professionals spend countless hours to create the most successful and memorable event possible. They know that although they will repeat this tremendous effort again next year, and the year after that, and for many years to come, for The University of Texas at Austin's graduates, *this* year is the one that matters the most. For the class of 2016, *this* year represents their World Series and Super Bowl combined. Hook 'em!



*Spring 2016 Commencement set-up at The University of Texas at Austin.*